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An enormous Confederate flag is going on display in Philly this week — here's why

by Stephan Salisbury, Updated: March 25, 2019



Sonya Clark's woven replica of the Confederate Flag of Truce, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum.
Credit: Carlos Avendano

What if? is a question that lurks at the heart of Sonya Clark's deeply evocative exhibition "Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know," opening Friday at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 1214 Arch St., and closing at the end of the day on Aug. 4.

What if — instead of the ubiquitous and martial Confederate battle flag — America had embraced the Confederate Flag of Truce, a largely forgotten white dish towel made for household use but commandeered nearly 154 years ago to signal the surrender of the South at Appomattox Court House?

What if this unassuming cloth with red embroidery became the symbol deployed everywhere — on mugs and stickers, on T-shirts, sweat shirts, caps, rugs, and yoga mats? What would that mean for the nation? Or, as Clark put it the other day: "What would it mean to the psychology of this nation if the truce flag replaced the flag associated with hate and white supremacy?"



Credit: Diego Valdez

Artist Sonya Clark, whose exhibition "Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know," is coming to the Fabric Workshop and Museum. For Clark, 52, who first encountered the Truce Flag at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History several years ago, the small piece of common cloth was almost a revelation and a window into possibilities, possibilities lost, and possibilities still waiting.

It was sitting in a gallery, near Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat.

The Truce Flag could be "a symbol for how we come together, how we reckon with the things that tore the country apart in the first place," she said, while checking the arrangement of looms at the Fabric Workshop in advance of her exhibition.

"Unfortunately, the things that tore the country apart in the first place are continuing to tear the country apart," she said. "We see that in Charlottesville. So, we haven't come to that reckoning. We haven't come to that atonement."

The wounds of war are still open, or, in Clark's view, "the war continues."

The Truce Flag represents the road not taken. Instead of that unassuming cloth becoming a call for reconciliation, the Confederate Battle Flag commands attention and is a reminder of that most wrenching of all divisions, civil war.



Credit: Curtis Compton / Atlanta Journal-Constitution File

Hundreds of pro-Confederate flag and gun supporters rally at Stone Mountain Park in 2015, Stone Mountain, Ga. “My engagement with the Truce Flag is that it offers up a kind of acknowledgment that what the South was fighting for, when they offered a surrender, they couldn’t fight for that anymore,” Clark said.

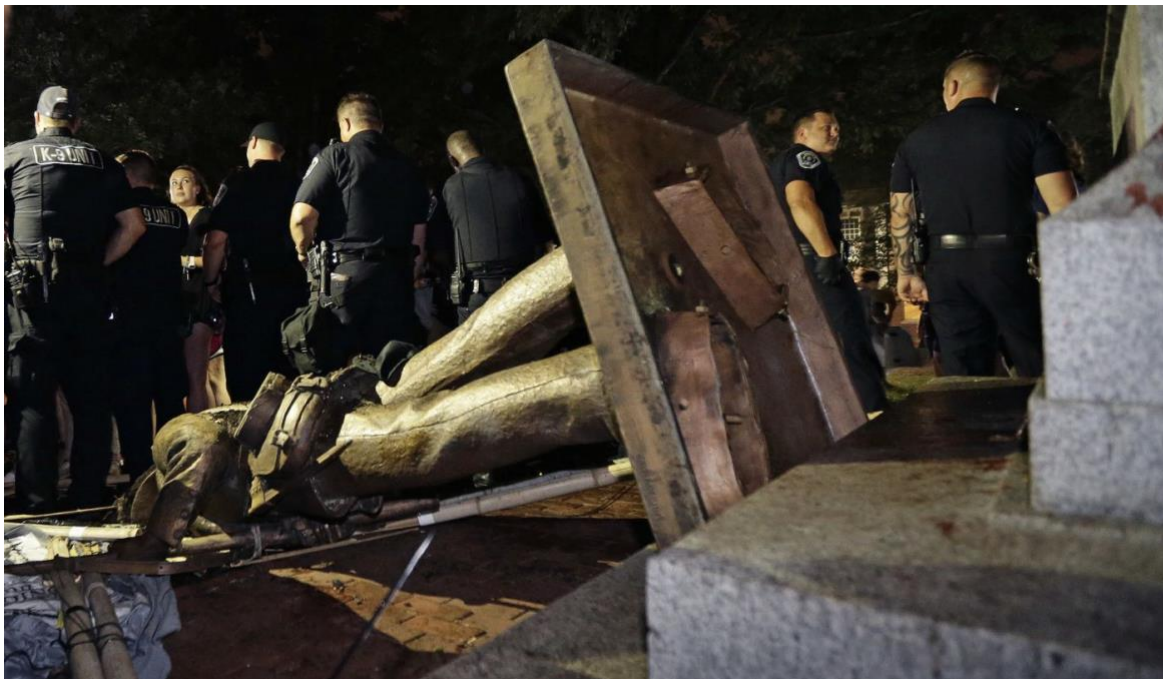
“It opened up the idea of peace, the idea of reconciliation, of atonement, but it never really got there. When the Civil War ended, white privilege got right back into place and Jim Crow laws happened shortly after that. Very, very quickly.”

Nearly 5,000 people were lynched between 1882 and 1968, according to the Tuskegee Institute. Do townsfolk living in a society at peace lynch their neighbors? “Merely by asking the question, what if the Flag of Truce was the symbol that endured — what would that mean?” she said. “What would it mean in the way that children learn the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction? What would it mean for how we deal with each other every day? But instead, we have in our minds one of the Confederate battle flags.”

Clark, a professor of art and art history at Amherst College, is increasingly well known for her work exploring race and American history, largely using artifacts of the nation’s material culture. Her art involving Confederate flags has drawn increasing attention as traditional monuments of the Confederacy have become focal points of controversy and the nation continues its struggle with the legacy of racial bondage.

In 2017, she performed *Unraveling*, the literal unraveling of a Confederate flag, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; PAFA acquired the piece. But Clark’s work is not limited to political symbols. On May 25, an exhibition of her work using everyday objects like combs, coins, seed beads, sugar, thin threads, and strands of human hair, will open at the African American Museum of

Philadelphia for a run through Sept. 8. But the exhibition exploring the Truce Flag promises to be one of her most potent efforts envisioning the invisible.



Credit: Gerry Broome / Ap File

Police stand guard after the Confederate statue known as Silent Sam was toppled by protesters at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in 2018. It's not that the Truce Flag has been hidden, Clark said. It is often on view at the Smithsonian, which has half of the flag. (The flag was cut in half at some point, and the other half has been cut and torn and passed around countless times, like precious relics, she said).

When she first saw it, Clark said she thought to herself, "Why don't I know this? Why doesn't everybody know this? It's not exactly hidden, but it's not amplified over and over and over," she said.

"Shouldn't we know it? What would it mean if we knew it in the same way as the battle flag?" "Monumental Cloth " introduces the flag and seeks, at least in part, to address that lack of amplification. On view will be an enormous replica of the original dish cloth — 15 by 30 feet of woven linen, the largest textile work ever produced by the Fabric Workshop. It is so monumental, said Susan Talbott, Fabric Workshop executive director, that it rivals any granite general on a pedestal.

"We're talking about an object that's a simple dish cloth, not a stone monument, and she's elevating it to stone and granite," Talbott said.

In addition to the large cloth, there will be 100 woven replicas the same size as the original. One hundred may not be millions, but it's a lot, Clark said, enough to suggest the importance of duplication and proliferation, and, again, amplification.

Another exhibition section will deal with the commercial sprawl of the battle flag image.

At 2 p.m. Saturday, Clark will perform *Reversals* at the Fabric Workshop, a piece in which she will use a washcloth with a Confederate Battle Flag design (bought off the internet) to clean dust from the floor of the gallery, revealing text from the preamble to the Declaration of Independence.



Occupy Philadelphia put signs on the statue of Frank Rizzo and held a vigil for Trayvon Martin, the Florida teenager shot and killed by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in February 2012, after a jury returned a not-guilty verdict for Zimmerman in 2013.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...

Visitors to the exhibition will also have an opportunity to make rubbings of the Truce Flag and to work at looms, with assistance, weaving portions of Truce Flags that will be created over the course of the exhibition.

“I think there is a way in which artwork can ask questions, and that way can be much more powerful than being really didactic and saying this means this and that means that,” Clark said. “Rhetorically, I could say that the battle is not over. We know the battle flag so well, it’s as if people want the battle to continue. The don’t want to say there was a surrender and a brokering of peace and a truce. We actually don’t want to lose the privilege that’s associated with the battle flag. And that privilege is a privilege of white supremacy and white privilege. People don’t give up privilege easily.”